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AUTHOR Photiadis, John D.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The rural Appalachian community of a few decades ago functioned as a relatively autonomous social, economic, educational, and recreational unit. It was a producing and consuming unit that provided a setting for interaction patterns that led to the building of the family social structure, which, in certain respects, contained rigid and well-defined patterns of authority and division of labor. Factors that contributed to the nature of the family structure were the isolation and cohesiveness of the rural community, similarity in organization of the various families, and a value orientation which strongly supported family and community organization. In recent years, the rapid improvements in means of mass communication/transportation, the availability of employment opportunities in urban centers, and improved education have affected the isolation of Appalachia and its relationship with the larger society. Interaction and communication with the larger society have contributed to the breakdown of family autonomy, wherein the rural referent has become a negative one. For some Appalachian families, however, a lack of means and cultural pluralism have produced a discord and deviance which manifests itself in extremes of non-conventionalism or traditionalism--behavior born of certain fears and the inability to compete in the mainstream, which, when reinforced by local interaction constitutes a culture of poverty. (JC)

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FROM RESPECTABLE POOR FAMILIES TO A CULTURE OF RURAL POVERTY

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BY

JOHN D. PHOTIADIS

JOHN F. SCHNABEL

AND

JOHN W. RYAN, JR.

WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY
MORGANTOWN, WEST VIRGINIA

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FROM RESPECTABLE POOR FAMILIES TO A CULTURE OF RURAL POVERTY

A major persistent problem area in Appalachia today is the poverty of families found in its rural hollows. Despite considerable efforts by a variety of action agencies these families remain poor and, what is more important, exhibit what might be called deviant life styles. Our main purpose here is to ascertain reasons for the persistence of their poverty and the existence of their so-called deviant life styles. A review of literature dealing with the old rural Appalachian family and interviews with older people maintaining sound memory have shown that only a few decades earlier these families did not behave in what might be called a deviant manner, although some were viewed as such. The specific purpose of this paper is to trace the processes that led to the deviancy of those families.

1. The Appalachian Family of A Few Decades Ago

As in most traditional societies, the rural Appalachian community of a few decades ago functioned as a relatively autonomous social, economic, educational, and recreational unit. It was a producing and consuming unit that provided a setting for interaction patterns that led to the building of the family social structure, which, in certain respects, contained reigid and well-defined patterns of authority and division of labor. Factors that contributed to the nature and rigidity of the family structure were the isolation and cohesiveness of the rural community, similarity in organization of the various families, and finally,

a value orientation which strongly supported family and community organization.

Tracing the history of a rural Tennessee Ridge community, Elmora Matthews[1] begins her analysis with Moses Huntley, a Revolutionary War soldier, born in Scotland, who was given a grant of eleven hundred acres of productive land in the second part of the eighteenth century. Some of the Huntley relatives still living in the community think that some of Moses' brothers may have come to the ridge community some forty years before Moses. Thus, Matthews suggests that "it is reasonable that the currently strong pattern of siblings (brothers and sisters) settling near one another was established in the valley's first homesteading. This would also explain the presence of a nephew of Moses' who married Moses' granddaughter; about two dozen of those grandchildren and great-grandchildren now live in the community."[2]

Those who know Appalachia, its hollows, and the American type of rural settlements based on scattered farmsteads and the inaccessability of trade centers, understand the importance of "neighbor and kin", which is the title of Matthews' book. As Charles Loomis and others before him used to say, "interaction that is repeated and persists, tends to develop bonds which we recognize as social systems."[3] Isolated social systems that involve homogeneity and a high rate of interaction tend to behave

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1. Elmora Matthews, Neighbor and Kin, Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville, Tennessee, 1965, p. 3

2. Matthews, ibid, p. 4

3. Charles Loomis, The Social System, D. Van Nostrand Co., Inc., Princeton, 1960, Chapter 1.

cohesively and exert strong influence on their members. Children born into such systems develop system-oriented personalities and tend to evaluate situations in the light of the organization of the system. Furthermore, siblings born in isolated Appalachian "kinship neighborhoods" were raised with the knowledge that these were both an extension of the family and the community.[1] This type of ecological setting is not found in the plains of America and only rarely in the long established village communities of Europe.

Tracing the social evolution of rural Appalachia on a large scale over a span of 150 years provides clues with important implications as to, first, the nature of rural society, and second, the nature of the transition of later years including family change, which is our main concern here; furthermore, one can study these changes under conditions involving certain controls.[2] Besides extensive interaction among members there must have been some basic factors that determined the nature of the structure of the Appalachian family. Survival of the family and adjustment to its environment were obviously major factors that influenced interaction processes which through the years produced the patterns of the family social system of the later decades.

In terms of the personality organization of the early rural Appalachians, we do not imply that highly organized personalities produce

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1. The answer of a colleague raised in rural Tennessee to a question about his knowledge when young of his third cousin, "not only third cousin, but thirteenth."

2. Because a comparison can be made with less isolated, less homogeneous and more properous regions elsewhere, anti-evolutionists see a number of shortcomings in this method of analysis.

the family complacency and harmony one can observe in simple societies.[1] Thirty or forty years ago in mountainous Appalachia, pressures from the mass society and their consequences were already present. Old fears, for instance, such as those implanted by mothers in the young (known to exist in the old Appalachia) were further aggravated by these developing pressures.

A general characteristic of the rural Appalachian family important for our analysis is that both the conjugal and the extended family functioned as an autonomous social system, and in addition, were very independent of other rural systems, often including the communities and even neighborhoods. This, in some ways, differentiates them from other familistic societies. Furthermore, the extended kinship unit was a family group, not formed solely on the basis of blood ties, but composed rather as a functional entity which included both paternal and maternal relatives.

2. Loss of Social Autonomy for Family and Community

In recent years, a number of drastic cultural changes, particularly technological ones, have affected the isolation of the region, and in turn, the relationship between the region and the larger American society. Among the most important changes of this nature have been the rapid improvements in means of mass communication and transportation, the availability of employment opportunities in urban centers, and the improvements in formal education that followed. Thus during the Forties, isolation of

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1. An extreme case would be the harmony and complacency of the recently discovered Phillippine Tasaday family.

2. Harry Schwarzweller, James Brown, and J. J. Mangalam, Mountain Families in Transition, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania, 1971, p. 23.

the rural Appalachian social system started decreasing rapidly, while the important process of interaction and communication with the outside kept increasing in intensity. Those few who had already out-migrated[1] -- especially during and immediately after the war years -- contributed to the intensity of these two processes through visitations and other contacts.[2] Interaction and communication are the two most crucial processes helping the incorporation of one social system into another (the larger society in our case) or the weakening of an old system (the rural community). In other words, a crucial indirect function of the availability of jobs in cities such as Cleveland and Cincinnati was the weakening of the boundary maintenance mechanism of the rural social system and, furthermore, the increased use of the outside as a reference group.

Along with the rest of the rural social system, boundary maintenance mechanisms -- for instance, norms suggesting that you cannot find a true friend in the city, or that the good life is in the hollows -- started rapidly losing their effectiveness for many as time went by. On the other hand, pressure from both the outside and within for economic achievement and, in turn, out-migration kept rapidly increasing to the extent that the rural community started becoming a negative reference group, community norms became ineffective, morale was low, and certain forms of alienation were higher than before. In a number of cases, the rural social organization almost collapsed. This stage of transition, which - at least in Appalachia - was initiated and usually sustained by the availability

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1. Relatively limited out-migration always existed.

2. Including relatives visiting them in the city.

of city jobs, often leads to a mass exodus of rural population.[1] Below we will examine discords such as those we mentioned above, but in reference to the rural family in particular.

3. The Modern Rural Appalachian Family

As in the past, the rural Appalachian family of today is still different from the rural family in regions of commercial agriculture because tradition is more important and the extended family predominates. In spite of incomplete kinship structures due to heavy out-migration, these attributes, and others associated with them still prevail, although not exactly in the same form as thirty or forty years ago. Other important attributes, however, such as family size, do not differentiate these families anymore. On the average, the Appalachian family had a household of 3.6 persons, compared to a 3.4 average for the United States as a whole, a difference much smaller than it was thirty years ago.[2] What is noticeable, however, is that thirteen of the more remote rural counties of Eastern Kentucky had average households of four or more persons.

The above two sets of figures probably indicate that for isolated communities, the factors that had kept the rural Appalachian family large still exists; but the figures also indicate that some of the more

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1. In less developed societies quite often this process takes place with a much more limited city job market; but the attraction of city life becomes important factor than in Appalachia.

2. See Chapter 1, "The Region: A New Survey", by Rupert Vance in The Southern Appalachian Region: A Survey, edited by Thomas Ford, The University of Kentucky Press, Lexington, KY, 1962, p. 1-8.

3. James Brown and Harry Schwarzweller, "The Appalachian Family", in Change in Rural Appalachia, edited by John Photiadis and Harry Schwarzweller, The university of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1970, p. 86.

accessible counties of Kentucky must have a considerably smaller number of family members than the average American family. The great decline in Southern Appalachian fertility, according to Ford and DeJong, "Came between 1950 and 1960, a period when the general fertility rate for the white population of the nation rose."[1] This, on the other hand, was the period when rural Southern Appalachians became more closely linked socio-psychologically to the larger society, and the period when the structure of rural Appalachian society made its strongest effort to secure better integration into the larger society.

This is not case however, with isolated rural Appalachian communities which still function as relatively autonomous social systems where families prefer more than two children. In certain respects a similar situation exists in some small suburban communities, not only in Appalachia, but in the United States as a whole, where the trend seems to be toward a larger than average American family. Since, in most cases, suburbanites are upper middle class families, and therefore, not under as much pressure to raise their level of living, familism usually associated with small community living is free to function as a causal factor.[2]

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1. Thomas R. Ford and Gordon F. DeJong, "The Decline of Fertility in the Southern Appalachian Mountain Region," in Social Forces, Vol. 42, October, 1963; p. 89-96; and Gordon F. DeJong, "Fertility Data for the Southern Appalachian Region 1930-1960", KAES-RS 22, Rural Sociology Department, University of Kentucky, Lexington, 1963.

2. In other words, as our theoretical framework would suggest, the rural had become more closely integrated into the larger society due to increased contact and communication, and as a consequence, rural Appalachians were under increased pressure to conform and catch up with their new reference group. Of course, smaller-sized families helped that effort.

4. Discord in the Rural Appalachian Family

As we have indicated technology is changing society at an accelerated rate that is faster than the ability of its systems, including the family or kinship group to adjust to it. For the rural family, the difficulty is more extensive because changes in the family and other social systems and in technology and culture in general, affect the individual's personality in different ways.

As with other institutions, the contemporary rural family is responding to dual pressures for change: to keep up with modernization in general,[1] and to fill the gap and catch up with the urban sector. As Burchinal suggests, changes in rural and also farm families are those that occurred first in urban areas and are diffused to rural areas through institutionalized and informal linkages.[2]

The above proposition would probably hold true, and it seems that it does, when information flows freely into the community, if similar socio-economic strata and personality predispositions are used for comparison and if the pressure on the local social system to develop deviancies is not an intervening variable. These conditions, however, are not always met, and so the rural society does not always follow urban patterns. Still, there are more similarities between rural and urban today than before, and similarly, the more modernized the societies, the less are the diff-

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1. We have been referring to the latter as the process of securing closer integration into society, and have indicated that for certain, particularly isolated, and low income regions, such as Appalachia, integration of such segments presents peculiarities and problems.

2. Lee Burchinal, "The Rural Family of the Future," Our Changing Rural Society," edited by James Copp, Chapter 5, Iowa State University Press, Ames, Iowa, 1964.

erences. But, at the same time, one can point out significant exceptions characterizing the rural family.

These exceptions in family structure, which relate to regional and community differences, are usually produced by the differences in (a) factors that determine the nature of the rural social systems (e.g. isolation, homogeneity) and (b) the use of buffer mechanisms to reduce the impact of the larger on the rural society. The latter becomes necessary in large part because of family discords such as those we just described.

Concerning the first of these factors, for instance, regardless of the pressures of the mass media rural communities in western society remain relatively homogeneous. Religious values among others remain different from those of the city.[1] Furthermore, large numbers of rural families even in this country, unlike corresponding segments of the urban society, still use other rural families as reference groups.

As for the pressure of keeping up with new societal expectations, a lack of means and cultural pluralism has forced some families away from modernization. Some are forced into patterns more traditional than they would have been without the excessive pressure from the larger society. Among those forced into discord and deviance are Appalachian families whoe heads have not been able to keep up with new styles and increased expectations. Many of these families have retreated into welfare roles and become non-conventional in form. Sometimes morals within such families are quite

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1. John D. Photiadis and B. B. Maurer, "Community Size and Social Attributes," Appalachian Center Research Report 5, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV, June, 1972.

unacceptable to the larger society. At other times the retreat is towards traditionalism (e.g. spending a lot of time hunting and fishing and close to nature, as their forefathers did). Such traditionalism is often a response to alienation rather than a simple case of preservation of old attributes due to the cohesiveness of the family and the rural social system in general. Among families with traditional values and an orientation toward the simple life, one finds in the mountains of Appalachia a number of persons who have returned from migration, and even non-Appalachians (often educated city families) who have moved into the mountains to live a simple life.

Members of local families we might call deviant types tend to interact with each other (sometimes exclusively) thus becoming a well-defined social system, and developing norms justifying their new deviancies. Typical are clusters of two to four or five families which one can see in various Appalachian hollows, often not very far from a cluster of conservative families or neighborhoods. Furthermore, entire neighborhoods sometimes consist of families of this type. Their deviancies, according to Ball,[1] are necessary mechanisms which isolated rural families use to maintain their sanity. David Looff, in his book, Appalachia's Children, claims

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1. Richard Ball, "A Poverty Case: The Analgesic Subculture of the Southern Appalachians," in The American Sociological Review, December, 1968.

that such families are not really disorganized.[1]

Some of the members of the non-conventional families we described above, particularly the traditional ones, are strong religious fundamentalists and members of sectarian churches which stick to the Bible, sometimes in a peculiar way, as when they involve snake handling as part of the ritual. In other words, because of these new relationships with the larger society, and in spite of a trend toward some kind of universal type of American family, peculiarities of these isolated rural families still exist and are often products of discords produced by the relationship between the rural and larger societal social system.

The conventionality of the rural setting is not found among these families, although it occurs in most rural families, particularly those of areas of slow transition,[2] such as those of the rural Midwest of the United States. Furthermore, most often in Appalachia the most conservative rural families, particularly when they are poor, are not to be found in the very small (less than 300 inhabitants) or open country

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1. In this respect, they are unlike the lower-lower class or the very poor families studied in Boston by Eleanor Pavenstadt. However, the very poor in Eastern Kentucky do share not only the hard lot of the very poor elsewhere in the nation, but another characteristic as well; the interacting, reinforcing factors of physical, mental, and cultural isolation operate to hold them in disadvantaged areas, frequently resisting change that would bring them into effective contact with the outside world. David Looff, Appalachia's Children, University of Kentucky Press, Lexington, 1971

2. Claude Fisher, "Toward a Subcultural Theory Of Urbanism," American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 80, No. 6, May 1975.

communities, but in larger communities, say up to 10,000.[1] In general, it seems that the more isolated or more distant from a community center the rural family is and the lower its socioeconomic status, the greater the possibility that it will change in less accord with the rest of the country.

Extremities were, one might say, more noticeable during the period of the so-called Great Appalachian Migration. For instance, during the years of the highest out-migration (1950-1960) at least certain types of so-called deviancies occurred more frequently. Typical is the case of an isolated low income central Appalachian county whose County Extension Agent told this author in the early Sixties that 55 percent of the fifth graders in his county were illegitimate.

It is evident that failures and disappointments in interaction with the institutions of the larger society play a role in creating the values associated with what some call "a culture of poverty". In the case of Appalachian migrants to northern cities, however, our data demonstrates the success of many of the poor in such interaction.[1] This implies that the persistence of values such as fatalism and traditionalism, which favor poverty are at least partially cultural and ideological traditions, producing fears and a reluctance to move into closer contact with the larger society in the face of others' success. This is particularly true of those very isolated rural families of the Appalachian hollows.

On the other hand, the lack of employment opportunities and the somewhat degrading experiences of welfare dependence have aggravated the con-

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1. John Photiadis, "West Virginians in Their Own State and Cleveland, Ohio, Appalachian Center Research Project 3, West Virginia, Morgantown, 1971.

sequences of these cultural values and contributed to the differences between certain cultural aspects of urban and rural poverty. Acquisition of such values is in large part associated with unfavorable comparisons with the larger society and, among other predispositions, possession of certain fears. It also involves further hesitation to attempt interaction on a competitive basis with the larger society.

David Looff's work with Eastern Kentucky children points out the persistence of fears and their unfavorable effects on the personality.[1] In addition to what our own theoretical framework suggests in relation to the role of the larger society, other articles challenge the existence of unfavorable consequences of such fears independent of frustrating failures in the institutions of the larger society.[2] Unfavorable values and early fears constitute a type of culture of poverty in areas where isolation is more profound and interaction with the system's institutions is less frequent.

Thus, although, "culture of poverty" type of concepts which involve aspects such as immediate gratification, types of authoritarian tendencies, and alienation maynnot apply to the early Appalachian poor or to some of the poor who, living in both rural and urban areas, are assuming the values of the dominant culture and who remain poor simply out of lack of opportunity some subcultural values and patterns of a culture of poverty type persist in certain isolated enclaves of rural Appalachia.

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1. David Looff, Appalachian Children, op. cit.

2. Barbara Coward, Joe Feagin, and J. Allen Williams, "The Culture of Poverty Debate: Some Additional Data," Social Forces, Vol. 21, 1972. p. 5.